

Gorbachev Condemns Baltic Move

Secession Decisions Are Declared Illegal As Showdown Looms

By Michael Dobbs
Washington Post Foreign Service

MOSCOW, May 14—President Mikhail Gorbachev today formally declared moves toward secession by Latvia and Estonia to be null and void, setting the stage for a constitutional showdown between the Kremlin and all three Baltic republics.

A Soviet television announcer broke into the main evening news program to read two presidential decrees accusing the legislatures of Latvia and Estonia of violating the "legal rights and interests" of ordinary Soviet citizens. Both republics earlier announced that they have entered a transitional period designed to lead to full independence from the Soviet Union.

The presidential decrees did not say what action the Kremlin intends to take against the republics, but they appeared to put Latvia and Estonia in the same constitutional position as the neighboring Baltic republic of Lithuania. Last month, the Kremlin imposed a partial economic blockade against Lithuania in an attempt to force it to revoke its March 11 declaration of independence.

Estonia and Latvia decided on a stage-by-stage approach to full sovereignty in the hope of keeping a dialogue going with Moscow and avoiding Lithuanian-style economic sanctions. Both republics are particularly vulnerable to economic pressure by the Kremlin because of their large Russian-speaking minorities, heavily concentrated in the industrial workforce.

But in a telephone interview, Estonian Foreign Minister Lennart Meri acknowledged that the legal

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differences between the independence declarations of the three Baltic republics were "microscopic" and he called for a united front against Moscow.

"We have a common past, a common future, common tactics, and a common strategy. It is only natural that the dialogue between Moscow and Lithuania—which up until now has been a dialogue of mutes—is now turning into a general dialogue between Moscow and all three Baltic states," he said.

At a weekend meeting in Tallinn, the Estonian capital, leaders of the three Baltic states called for immediate negotiations with Moscow and reestablished the prewar Baltic Council. They also sent letters to Gorbachev and President Bush, urging them to discuss the issue of Baltic independence at next month's summit in Washington.

Only hours before Gorbachev's decrees, a helicopter flew over Riga, the Latvian capital, dropping leaflets urging residents to stage a political strike against the Latvian authorities. Latvia's parliament voted May 4 to restore several articles of the prewar constitution including a clause that describes Latvia as an "independent, democratic republic."

The pro-Moscow Latvian Communist Party is supporting a call by the Russian-dominated Interfront organization for a general strike Tuesday to protest Latvia's independence declaration. Some 20,000 workers have already been laid off in neighboring Lithuania because of a drastic reduction in Soviet energy supplies.

There were scuffles outside the Latvian parliament today as dozens of Russian army officers tried to force their way into the building to deliver a petition against independence to President Anatolijs Gorbunovs. Latvian journalists said police were called after the army officers jostled Latvian women carrying placards demanding abolition of compulsory service in the army.

Residents of Latvia and Estonia say the Kremlin appears to have cut back supplies of energy and other raw materials over the past month. Gorbachev has warned the leaders of both republics that he reserves the right to take economic measures against them, but there is no evidence that sanctions are imminent.

Condemning Estonia's decision on March 30 to move toward sovereignty in stages, Gorbachev accused the Estonian legislature of failing to consult "the population of the republic and ignoring economic, political, cultural and legal ties formed in the U.S.S.R." He said that actions in support of independence on the basis of the Estonian declaration were "illegal."

Addressing Latvia, he accused political leaders there of acting "against the rights and interests of other subjects of the Soviet federation."

The Soviet constitution gives constituent republics the right to freely secede from the Union. But Gorbachev contends that the right can be exercised only in the framework of a new law on secession that envisages protracted negotiations and a cooling-off period of up to five years.